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image

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MONSTRESS

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THE STORY SO FAR...

The Battle of Ravenna, a deadly opening salvo in the new war between humans and Arcanics, was a devastating affair, made even worse when Maika Halfwolf was forced to fight her Ancient grandmother, the Wolf Queen, who had been possessed by a murderous rage. To win that fight, Maika and Zinn, her Monstrum ancestor, used the fragments of the Shaman-Empress's mask to merge into one singular being – and found a measure of peace and understanding in their complex relationship.

In the aftermath of the battle, the survivors of Ravenna piled into Arcanic airships to fly to safety and were offered dubious assistance by members of the Blood Court, the splinter cult led by Maika's father. Maika finally confronted her dearest friend, Tuya, about their history and Tuya's status as the Baroness of the Last Dusk, and for a brief, beautiful moment they seemed to reconcile – until Tuya fulfilled her sworn duty and injected Maika with a serum that promises to destroy her mind and leave her body (and Zinn's powers) in Dusk Court control.

THE PLAYERS...

MAIKA An Arcanic young woman, former slave of the Cumaean witch-nuns, and survivor of the Great War. Ruthless and haunted, she is a direct descendant of the powerful Shaman-Empress and Zinn — an ancient and dangerous god that now inhabits Maika's body and mind. Determined to uncover the truths of her mother's secretive life and death, she currently possesses two of the five fragments of the Mask of the Shaman-Empress, which have been hidden throughout the Known World.

ZINN A mysterious, primordial Monstrum of tremendous power that shares Maika's body and mind. Drawn into the world and beloved by the Shaman-Empress, Zinn has spent several thousands of years being passed down into the bodies of her descendants. This Old God is driven by a deadly hunger, leaving behind desiccated corpses of humans and Arcanics alike. But there's far more to this being — and their repressed memories — than meets the eye…

KIPPA An Arcanic fox girl born in a refugee camp and saved from Cumaean witch-nuns by Maika. Unwaveringly loyal to her chosen family, she sees the best in others — and their true selves, thanks to her awakening Arcanic gift — and will leap at any chance to help those in need. Curiously, she can understand the language of the Monstra and other primal creatures, which most beings cannot.

TUYA: Maika's most trusted friend since the Great War. However, she is also Baroness of the Last Dusk, a high-level member of the Arcanic Dusk Court, and married the Warlord to forge an alliance with the Dawn Court. Tasked with containing or destroying Maika's power, she poisoned Maika's mind to take control of her body — and the powerful Monstrum inside.

SIR CORVIN D'ORO: An Arcanic Lord, First Watchman of the Dusk Court, and Commander of the Inner Wall. He is surrounded by a shield that neither magic nor Monstra can seem to penetrate. While Corvin is loyal to the Dusk Court, he has willingly defied their orders to protect Maika. He believes that she can, and will, serve a greater purpose.

THE LORD DOCTOR: The Ghoul Killer — a cannibal known for eating his victims — and Maika's father. Once the vessel for Zinn, he bears The Mark of the Eye but passed on the Monstrum when Maika was born. After Moriko left with a very young Maika, he founded the Arcanic Blood Court and gathered war-masters from across the Known World, sowing chaos in hopes that, one day, he will become an all-powerful Shaman-Emperor.

YOU DID THIS! WAKE HER UP OR I'LL KILL YOU!

I'LL KILL YOU!

HOW DARE YOU?

THE LADY HALFWOLF HAS FALLEN *ILL.* NO DOUBT FROM THE ***RADICAL PHYSICAL CHANGES*** SHE ENDURED.

THE DUSK COURT WILL SEE THAT SHE RECEIVES THE ***BEST*** CARE.

BARONESS... OF ALL THE LIES YOU'VE TOLD, SURELY THIS IS THE ONE YOU SHOULD BE MOST ASHAMED OF.

YOU HAVE BIGGER CONCERNS THAN MY ***SHAME,*** LORD CORVIN.

THE FOX IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY NOW. YOU OWE US THAT MUCH FOR YOUR... DISOBEDIENCE.

YOU'LL MAKE HER AVAILABLE FOR QUESTIONING, WHEN NECESSARY.

NO!

AND IF I DON'T?

HOW MUCH MORE CAN YOUR FAMILY STAND TO LOSE?

YOU TOO, CAPTAIN MIN?

MAIKA HALFWOLF IS THE GRANDDAUGHTER OF THE WOLF QUEEN. SHE IS OF THE DAWN COURT, AND THAT IS WHERE SHE SHOULD BE TAKEN FOR HEALING.

THE WARLORD WOULD NEVER PERMIT --

WOOSH

REMEMBER YOUR PLACE, GREY RIDER. YOU ARE A SOLDIER. AND SOLDIERS DON'T THINK.

THEY OBEY.

IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THAT, YOU MAY RESIGN YOUR COMMISSION AND LEAVE THIS AIRSHIP AT YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE.

YOU MIGHT THANK ME FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO PART WAYS.

WASN'T THAT YOUR FORMER COMMANDER, WAR-MASTER ULIAZA, STANDING AT THE PROW OF THE BLOOD COURT'S AIRSHIP?

JOIN HER, IF YOU LIKE.

WE HAVE TO SAVE MISS!

CAN'T YOU STEAL HER BODY... AND... AND FLY AWAY WITH HER?

FOR WHAT PURPOSE, KIPPA? THE LADY HALFWOLF IS GONE. NOTHING IS LEFT BUT THE FLESH.

I DON'T BELIEVE IT! SHE'S TOO STRONG!

SO SHE'S *NOT* ILL. I THOUGHT IT UNLIKELY. DID THEY POISON HER?

YES! THEY WANT HER POWER!

HER POWER... BUT NOT *HER.*

THIS DOESN'T MAKE SENSE.

THE HALFWOLF WOULD HAVE FOUGHT FOR THE COURTS. SHE DIDN'T RUN FROM RAVENNA, AND SHE WOULDN'T HAVE RUN FROM THE REST OF THIS WAR. I SAW IT IN HER EYES.

WHY STEAL WHAT SHE WOULD HAVE GIVEN FREELY?

THE QUESTION, CAPTAIN MIN, IS WHY *TRUST...* WHEN YOU CAN CONTROL?

POOR THING. I'VE NEVER SEEN A SICKNESS LIKE THIS.

I WOULDN'T FEEL TOO SORRY FOR HER. I'VE HEARD ALL THE STORIES OUT OF RAVENNA. SHE'S A RUTHLESS KILLER -- LIKE MOST ELITES.

=PFFT= YOU'RE A SCIENTIST FROM THE COURTS -- WHAT DO YOU KNOW? RAVENNA IS MY HOME. THE LADY HALFWOLF FOUGHT FOR US.

WELL, NO MORE FIGHTING FOR HER. SHE'S GOOD AS DEAD.

YOU'RE DISGUSTING.

I'M A PRAGMATIST.

ALSO... I'VE NEVER SEEN A PROSTHETIC THIS ADVANCED. IT'S BEEN EMBEDDED IN HER SHOULDER -- A PERMANENT LIMB.

AND YOU SAY IT FUNCTIONS LIKE A NORMAL ARM?

I SAW IT MYSELF WHEN THE LADY HALFWOLF VISITED THE INFIRMARY.

FASCINATING. UNFORTUNATELY, THE BARONESS WILL BE QUITE DISAPPOINTED. REMOVING THIS WOULD CAUSE TREMENDOUS DAMAGE TO THE --

HMMM...

THAT'S ODD.

WHAT'S *THAT?*

P-PLEASE FORGIVE US, MY L-LADY. WE'RE S-STILL LEARNING THIS T-TECHNOLOGY.

DON'T APOLOGIZE. IT'S COMPLICATED. THERE'S NO FAULT IN NOT FULLY UNDERSTANDING IT YET.

I'VE BEEN TINKERING WITH THE LORD DOCTOR'S INVENTIONS SINCE I WAS A CHILD, AND I STILL FIND THEM A CHALLENGE.

HERE, YOU SEE THIS GEAR, DEEP INSIDE? THE KEY TO CLEANING IT IS DELICATE AND LIGHT MOVEMENTS. USE THIS NEEDLE...

"...LIKE A PAINT BRUSH..."

THIS PLAN IS A MISTAKE.

RARE OF YOU TO SAY SO.

YOU NEVER HAVE AN OPINION ON THE LORD DOCTOR'S STRATEGIES.

I'M SPEAKING WITH *YOU*, ULIAZA, AND NOT THE OTHER WAR-MASTERS.

YOU'VE BEEN MY CONFIDANT SINCE I LEARNED TO TALK.

YOU GIVE ME TOO MUCH CREDIT. I BARELY EVER SAW YOU, CHILD.

IT MATTERED. I HAD NO MOTHER.

SO WHAT IS THE MISTAKE?

IT'S PERSONAL... AND AFFECTS NONE OF OUR PLANS.

PERSONAL, *EH?*

I WONDERED HOW YOU WOULD FEEL, MEETING THE HALFWOLF FOR THE FIRST TIME.

SHE FRUSTRATED ME -- EVEN BEFORE SHE OPENED HER MOUTH. AND I FRUSTRATED MYSELF WITH MY REACTION.

IT WASN'T RATIONAL.

HOW COULD IT BE?

I'M BETTER THAN THAT. I HAVE TO BE BETTER THAN THAT.

THERE'S SO LITTLE LEFT OF ME, EXCEPT MY CONTROL.

EXCUSE ME, ULIAZA.

I'M BEING SUMMONED.

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AS I SUSPECTED, THE DUSK COURT'S INTOLERANCE FOR A POWER GREATER THAN ITS OWN HAS LED IT TO TAKE A RATHER RASH ACTION.

THEY HAVE... INCAPACITATED... THE HALFWOLF.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? IS SHE DEAD?

THEY BELIEVE SO, WHICH IS ALL THAT MATTERS.

DO NOTHING YET. THIS IS NOT A PROBLEM.

AH.

I HEAR SOMETHING IN YOUR SILENCE.

YOU WIN, EITHER WAY. NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HALFWOLF.

INDEED.

THOUGH I PLAN TO WIN *EMPHATICALLY.*

SO THE BARONESS STRUCK. I HAD HOPED MAIKA MIGHT AVOID HER STING.

YOU'LL GO THE DUSK COURT, I ASSUME?

WHERE ELSE?

THE HALFWOLF ISN'T WITHOUT HER ALLIES, BUT MUCH WILL BE AWAKENED BY HER ARRIVAL, AND I SHOULD BE THERE.

AND, OF COURSE, HER TWO MASK FRAGMENTS WILL NEED TO BE SECURED.

CERTAINLY.

BUT NOT BY YOU, LORD DOCTOR, I PROMISE YOU THAT.

HMMM. I DID ENJOY OUR BATTLE, VIHN.

WE SHOULD CONFRONT EACH OTHER MORE OFTEN.

ONLY BECAUSE EVERY ENCOUNTER TEACHES YOU SOMETHING ABOUT ME.

THE SAME IS TRUE FOR YOU, YES?

OH, INDEED.

I CONFESS, YOU'VE SURPRISED ME WITH YOUR INTEREST IN MY DAUGHTER, AND THE HELP YOU'VE GIVEN HER. IT'S SO UNLIKE YOUR KIND. HARDLY BENEVOLENT, I'M SURE.

ISN'T IT? YOU'VE MET SO VERY FEW OF US, LORD DOCTOR. AND THE MEMORIES YOU'VE STOLEN FROM ZINN ARE QUITE OLD.

YOUR DAUGHTER SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO ASSEMBLE THE MASK... BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN I DON'T ADMIRE HER.

IN ANOTHER AGE, SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN THE SOLDIER WE NEEDED... A PERFECT UNION OF TWO EMPIRES.

WHO KNOWS? PERHAPS MORE WEAPONS LIKE HER WOULD HAVE TURNED THE TIDE AGAINST OUR OLD FOE.

WE MIGHT STILL BE LIVING IN THE STARS, LORD DOCTOR.

DOUBTFUL. SOME FATES ARE INEVITABLE.

JUST AS SOME GREAT POWERS WILL FIND A WAY TO EXIST, NO MATTER HOW YOU TRY TO DENY THEM.

THEY ARE AN INTENTION MADE FLESH.

THAT WAS HOW THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS CAME TO BE, IS IT NOT?

THAT IS ANOTHER MATTER ENTIRELY.

HARDLY, VIHN.

BUT THE ANCIENTS DO LOVE DECEIVING THEMSELVES, DON'T THEY?

BARONESS... MY DEEPEST APOLOGIES.... BUT YOU SHOULD CONSIDER REMOVING THIS LIMB.

WILL THE FLESH ROT?

WELL, NO.

BUT YOUR ARM IS USELESS. THE NERVE ENDINGS ARE DEAD, YOU HAVE NO MUSCLE, AND THE BONES ARE SOFT. YOU COULD REPLACE IT WITH A --

ABSOLUTELY NOT.

...AS YOU WISH.

TEND TO THE WARLORD. MAKE SURE SHE REMAINS SEDATED UNTIL WE ARRIVE AT THE DUSK COURT.

BARONESS... THAT COULD PROVE DIFFICULT. I'M SURE YOU KNOW THE FIRST-BORN CHILDREN OF ANCIENTS ARE EXCEPTIONALLY RESISTANT TO --

SHE MUST NOT WAKE UNTIL WE ARRIVE. AM I CLEAR?

Y-YES!

TANNO, JOIN ME.

YOU HEARD ALL OF THAT?

OF COURSE.

I SUPPORT YOU IN ALL THINGS, BARONESS... BUT I HOPE YOU'VE CONSIDERED WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF THE WARLORD AND THE WOLF QUEEN AWAKEN BEFORE WE REACH THE DUSK COURT.

THEY MIGHT DISAGREE ON MANY THINGS, BUT NOT THE HALFWOLF. THEY BOTH WANT HER.

AND THAT'S NOT EVEN TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE BLOOD COURT AND THEIR... INTERESTS.

YOU'VE HANDLED THE AIRSHIP CAPTAINS, YES?

THEY, AND THEIR LIEUTENANTS, WERE MORE THAN WILLING TO BE BRIBED. THEY'LL TAKE US TO THE DUSK COURT, EVEN IF LORD CORVIN OR THE GREY RIDERS TRY TO CONVINCE THEM OTHERWISE.

THEN WE HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR.

THE WOLF QUEEN AND MY WIFE CAN SCREAM AND RAGE... THEY CAN EVEN KILL ME, IF THEY WANT... BUT IT'S DONE NOW. THE HALFWOLF IS JUST A VESSEL... AND ONLY THE DUSK COURT HAS THE TECHNOLOGY TO CONTROL THAT VESSEL.

EVERYONE WILL FALL IN LINE. EVEN THE BLOOD COURT. THEY ONLY CARE ABOUT THE HALFWOLF'S POWER.

WELL, THEY'LL GET IT.

ALL OF THEM WILL.

STOP SQUIRMING. THIS WILL ONLY TAKE A MOMENT.

HEALER BETANNI... YOU'RE BLEEDING.

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR CHILD! HOLD HER STILL!

I'LL DO THAT.

GET OFF ME, BROTHER. YOU MIGHT AS WELL USE YOUR FEET. YOUR FINGERS ARE TOO SLOW AND THICK FOR THIS WORK.

BUT AT LEAST MY HANDS AREN'T SHAKING.

I'M STILL CAPABLE, YOU KNOW.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO PROVE THAT TO ANYONE. NOT NOW. HEAL, BETANNI. HEAL SO YOU CAN HEAL OTHERS.

AND WHAT ABOUT YOU? THE DESTINY THAT THE ORACLE PROPHESIED WAS FULFILLED -- EVEN THOUGH YOU RESISTED. THE HALFWOLF HAS BEEN TAKEN.

YOU CAN TAKE YOUR PLACE AGAIN IN THE DUSK COURT -- A HIGH LORD COMMANDER -- NO LONGER NEEDED AMONGST THE FILTHY RABBLE.

THAT WAS NEVER ME. THAT WAS A LIE, BETANNI.

I'M NOT GOING TO LIE ANYMORE. I CAN'T.

YOU BETTER, BROTHER.

NOT FOR YOURSELF, OR OUR FAMILY... BUT FOR KIPPA.

WITHOUT YOUR PROTECTION, THE DUSK COURT WILL EAT HER ALIVE.

HELLO?

...MISS?

OH! BUT... IF YOU'RE HERE, THEN...

YOU'RE PLUMPER THAN I REMEMBER. MAIKA HAS KEPT YOU WELL FED, YES? HOW CONSIDERATE.

I'M SURE YOU'D TASTE DELICIOUS. HOW THE OLD GOD HAS RESISTED, I CANNOT IMAGINE.

=GASP=

BUT DON'T WORRY, I WON'T BITE.

I NEED YOU... IN ONE PIECE.

HOW ARE *YOU* HERE? GET AWAY FROM --

QUIET.

NO! I DON'T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH YOU!

DON'T YOU WANT TO HURT THE PEOPLE WHO HARMED MAIKA?

...

MISS TOLD ME ABOUT SEEING YOU AGAIN IN THE BLOOD COURT. YOU'RE ONLY HERE BECAUSE YOU WANT THE MASK, OR -- OR YOU'RE HELPING HER FATHER. OR THE WITCHES.

SOMETHING BAD, I KNOW IT. BUT IT'S NOT FOR *HER.*

DOES IT MATTER WHY I'M HERE? IF THE END RESULT PROTECTS MAIKA?

EVERYONE SAYS MISS IS DEAD.

HEH. NOT YOU.

CAN YOU WAKE HER?

THE QUESTION IS... CAN MAIKA WAKE HERSELF?

I WAS FRIENDS WITH HER MOTHER. I WATCHED HOW MORIKO TRAINED HER DAUGHTER...

...AND I KNOW ONE THING, CHILD...

"WOLVES DON'T DIE EASY."

THE BARONESS SAID NO VISITORS.

WHAT HARM COULD *SHE* DO?

REALLY? MUST WE ALSO DEAL WITH HYSTERICAL CHILDREN?

COME, LITTLE ONE. OF COURSE YOU CAN SEE YOUR FRIEND.

YOU MIGHT AS WELL MAKE YOURSELF USEFUL. THE HALFWOLF NEVER SPOKE TO YOU ABOUT THIS PROSTHESIS, DID SHE? ITS COMPONENTS OR ITS MAKER?

N-NO. W-WHY?

IT'S STRANGELY... ACTIVE. EVEN TRANSMITTING, PERHAPS.

I D-DON'T UNDERSTAND.

NEITHER DO I.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MISS WHEN WE REACH THE DUSK COURT?

THEY'LL TRY TO REVIVE HER, DEAR.

WITH WHAT? PRAYER? NO, NO, IT'LL BE THE KROMIKON CHAMBER, MOST CERTAINLY.

I'VE NEVER SEEN IT MYSELF, BUT I HEAR IT'S WHERE THE ANCIENT, MO YEN, SUBDUED AND EVISCERATED THE LAST OF THE --

AH, UBASTI. FINALLY.

I'VE GOT YOU NOW, LITTLE RED LIGHT... I'VE ALMOST HOOKED THE WIRE --

MAYBE THE BARONESS WILL FIND A NEKOMANCER FOR YOU? A GOOD ONE MIGHT BE ABLE TO SUMMON THE HALFWOLF'S GHOST.

PAH! THAT ONLY WORKS ON THE FULLY DEAD.

IF THERE'S STILL A HEARTBEAT, NEKOMANCERS ARE USELESS --

ZZZZAAASH!

GODDESS!

AAUUGH!!

FWOOSH

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YAAHHH!

MISS...

NO ONE FIGHTS LIKE YOU, MISS.

TEAR THEM WITH YOUR TEETH... EAT THE DARKNESS...

THAT'S WHAT I'M GOING TO DO.

TUYA.

I KNOW WHY.

BUT, STILL...?

WHY PRETEND YOU CARED?

WHY LET ME HOPE?

I LOST HOPE, TUYA.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

I HAD NO HOPE. NONE.

AND THEN I FOUND IT AGAIN.

I FOUND MY HOPE.

AND I GAVE IT TO YOU --
JUST FOR A MOMENT.

BUT YOU...USED
IT AGAINST ME.

THE ONLY TRUE GIFT
I COULD GIVE YOU.

I USED TO THINK THAT NOTHING COULD HURT AS MUCH AS THE WAR.

OR THE HUNGER.

WELL, FUCK YOU.

YOU THOUGHT I'D BE GONE FOR GOOD?

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YOU THOUGHT YOU'D
ESCAPE SO EASILY?

WELL, YOU GOT IT WRONG.

GASP

YOU SHOULD HAVE TAKEN WHAT I OFFERED, TUYA.

BECAUSE NEXT TIME, WHAT I BRING WON'T BE HOPE.

TO BE CONTINUED...

NEXT ISSUE

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ISSUE 36

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